

# Bush signs orders to improve treatment of faith-based groups

By United Methodist News Service

U.S. President George W. Bush has signed executive orders that will give faith-based initiatives and religious charities a more even footing with secular groups in receiving support from government agencies.

The president signed the orders to move forward some of the faith-based measures that had originally failed to win Senate approval in one comprehensive bill, but a representative of a United Methodist agency is still concerned about separation of church and state issues.

"I'm announcing a series of actions to stop the unfair treatment of religious charities by the federal government," Bush told a regional White House conference on faith-based initiatives Dec. 12 in Philadelphia.

If a charity is helping the needy, it should not matter what religious symbols are on the wall, remarked the president, who is a United Methodist. "The days of discriminating against religious groups just because they are religious are coming to an end."

In a series of executive orders, the president directed federal agencies to treat religious groups like any other not-for-profit organization. He assured religious charities that they should be able to receive government contracts for social service programs without being forced to change their character or compromise their mission.

The president cited examples of past discrimination that his orders were meant to prevent in the future. He spoke of a rescue mission in Iowa being asked to return funds because its board of directors was not secular enough, a homeless shelter in South Dakota being denied funding because it offered voluntary prayers before meals and the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty being discouraged from applying for federal funds because it had the word Jewish in its name. "This discrimination shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the law," Bush said.

The Rev. Eliezer Valentin-Castañon, an executive with the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, later voiced disappointment with the president's use of an executive order on these issues.

"The United Methodist Church has stated in the past that it doesn't have a problem being engaged in providing public services," he said. Most of the mainline churches don't object to being in contracts with the state to offer social services, he said. Their objection is with the employment policy contained in Bush's order

concerning federal contracts larger than \$10,000.

"When you combine that (provision of service) with discrimination in the process of hiring and firing people paid with tax dollars, the church has said that is not an acceptable way of using tax dollars because it does not maintain the clear separation of church and state," he explained.

Valentin-Castañon said he believes churches or other religious bodies have a right to hire or not hire anyone with their own money, but he objects to having lifestyles or beliefs judged by sectarian criteria if the work is funded by public money.

"I recognize that government has no business endorsing a religious creed, or directly funding religious worship or religious teaching," the president said to the regional conference, where he announced the executive orders. Bush explained that he was directing all federal agencies to follow the principle of equal treatment in awarding social service contracts.

The executive actions differ from legislation that was being discussed in that these orders do not include any tax relief for donors who do not itemize nor do they offer any new grant or contract money for faith-based and community charities.

The president has done what he can do to address these issues now, said a senior administration official. Existing laws protect the rights of religious groups to hire people of their own faith in many kinds of service programs, he added, including those associated with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, the welfare-to-work funding provided by legislation passed in 1996.

One executive order was addressed to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, directing that religious nonprofit organizations be accorded the same grants or loans following disasters like earthquakes and floods that comparable secular groups receive.

Another order directed the Department of Agriculture and the Agency for International Development to establish offices within their structures to facilitate faith-based initiatives. Five other agencies already have such offices.

The president declared, "When government discriminates against religious groups, it is not the groups that suffer most. The loss comes to the hungry who don't get fed, to the addicts who don't get help, to the children that drift toward self-destruction." He pledged "to support the armies of compassion." ■

## news briefs:

### African-American convocation set

(UMNS) "Rooted, Reaching, Transforming" will be the theme for the third Convocation for Pastors of African-American Churches, planned for Jan. 7-10 in Houston. The event is designed to inform, encourage and inspire clergy who have primary responsibility for the spiritual health of African-American United Methodist congregations. Leaders for the event include the Rev. Kirbyjon H. Caldwell, senior pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston; Violet L. Fisher, bishop of the New York West Area; and Zan W. Holmes Jr., retired United Methodist pastor from the North Texas Conference. Workshop topics include "Raising Up the Next Generation of Pastors" and "Spiritual Authority." Saint John's United Methodist Church will host the event. For more information, contact the Rev. Vance P. Ross at (301) 927-6133 or [vphilip@aol.com](mailto:vphilip@aol.com).

### Bush names Drew president to lead panel

(UMNS) President George Bush has tapped the president of United Methodist-related Drew University to lead an independent commission probing the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Thomas H. Kean, 67, was named to replace former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who resigned Dec. 13. Kean will remain president of the Madison, N.J., university while serving as chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. Congress has given the commission 18 months to complete the investigation.

### Legislative briefing planned for March

WASHINGTON (UMNS) – The international advocacy agency of the United Methodist Church will hold a legislative briefing for local church leaders March 2-5. The event will help church social action leaders respond to moral and political issues as the new Congress tackles its agenda, the Board of Church and Society said. Several notable United Methodists, including President Bush, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), have been invited to speak. For more information, visit [http://www.umc-gbcs.org/legislative1\\_brief.htm](http://www.umc-gbcs.org/legislative1_brief.htm) online or call the Board of Church and Society, (202) 488-5600.

### Korean-American ministries celebrated

(UMNS) The United Methodist Church will observe Jan. 12 as Centennial Sunday for Korean American Ministries, honoring the arrival of the first Korean Christians in Hawaii in 1903. Celebrations will culminate in an April 24-27 event in Hawaii. Bishop Hae-Jong Kim, leader of the church's Pittsburgh Area and chairman of the planning committee for the celebration, asked the Council of Bishops to support the event in a resolution. The bishops are encouraging local churches to observe the Jan. 12 anniversary. The National Association of Korean American United Methodist Churches and the denomination's Board of Global Ministries are working together with other boards and agencies of the church to plan the celebration. ■

For complete versions of these and other United Methodist News Service articles, visit [www.holstonconference/thecall](http://www.holstonconference/thecall).

## New book announced by Abingdon Press

This month, United Methodist Abingdon Press will publish *The Delany Sisters Reach High*, a children's book based on two African-American sisters who lived to be more than 100 years old. Amy Hill Hearth, a former *New York Times* reporter, first told the story of Sarah Louise (Sadie) and Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) Delany in the best-seller *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. The book for children ages 6-12, with illustrations by award-winning artist Tim Ladwig. Cost is \$17. For more information, go to [www.abingdonpress.com](http://www.abingdonpress.com).

UMNS photo courtesy of the United Methodist Publishing House

